

Success in Selection: Maricopa County's Detention Officer Hiring Procedures

MORE INMATES . . . LESS money . . . and fewer and fewer staff to meet the demand. These truths could probably be stated in more dramatic ways, but no matter how they are expressed, the reality is the same: those responsible for operating the nation's jails are at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to attracting and keeping quality employees. For as we recognize, no one grows up saying, "I want to work in a jail." Even more importantly, not just anybody can.

Therein lies the crux of the issue. Hiring individuals is not enough. Numbers aren't the only concern. To avoid litigation, reduce liability, and manage risk, there must be a focus on quality. But what is quality? How do you find quality officers? How do you avoid hiring a problem employee while meeting the demand for staff? In other words, how do you achieve the goal of hiring responsible adults in a responsible way?

While the perfect answer may not exist, much is known about the process of officer selection that is helpful in achieving this goal. It starts with choosing the right individuals to become a part of the selection process,

and it ends with giving them the right tools and support to get the job done.

THE OLD SAYING, "GARBAGE in, garbage out," helps to illustrate the importance of putting into the process of selection what you want to get out of it. If you want to hire responsible adults who are committed to the organization and who are fit for the job, you must put the same kind of individuals into the decision-making process and make them a part of your personnel staff. If your focus is on attracting a diverse group of applicants to the job based on challenge, opportunity, and professionalism, the people they see first should reflect the same qualities.

Staff involved in personnel hiring should represent the best in terms of appearance, attitude, and approach. Too often, agencies assign to the background and selection team individuals who otherwise could no longer

perform detention work or who are on their way out.

People are generally drawn to those who think and act as they do. Therefore, if you want to attract the best and choose the best, it only makes sense to have those involved in the selection process be a diverse group of individuals who think, act, and are the best.

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and lecturer Gordon Graham preaches, "If it is predictable, it is preventable." In the context of personnel selection, this has clear implications. If an individual has a history of irresponsible behavior or poor judgment, meets the profile of one unsuited for detention work, or is physically or mentally unable to do the job, there should be no surprise if a problem arises if all or part of that information is ignored and the person is hired to do the work of a detention officer.

The problem is how to get to the information that makes possible an informed choice. In the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, that information is obtained through a formal system consisting of several phases.

PHASE 1.	On a weekly basis,
Candidate	potential candidates are
Orientation	invited to participate in
	an orientation process
	located at a site with
	ample parking and easy

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CRITERIA FOR INITIAL ELIGIBILITY FOR DETENTION WORK-

- Drug Use-Meets Arizona POST Standards.
- Criminal History-No felonies (automatic disqualification); no misdemeanors within last 3 years.
- Employment-No pattern of disciplinary problems.
- Traffic-No DUI within last 3 years; no pattern of violations.
- Psychological-Psychologically suited for detention work.
- Polygraph-No inconsistencies/no deception.
- Medical-Able to perform essential functions with or without reasonable accommodation.

access. At the orientation, a background investigation supervisor discusses the job in terms of real life and real issues. Candidates are encouraged to ask questions, and every effort is made to make the job real to them.

Following the job overview, the supervisor discusses selection criteria and the selection process. Using the standards set for correctional officers by the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board (the governing body for peace officer certification in Arizona) as a baseline, applicants are advised of automatic disqualifiers and general circumstances that would lead to their not being selected (box).

After this information is shared with potential applicants, there is a break in the orientation to give individuals an opportunity to leave discreetly. Those who stay complete a background questionnaire and job application form.

Both completed forms are reviewed by an investigator before the candidate

leaves the orientation. If the information reflects that the minimum qualifications have been met, the candidate is scheduled for a background interview-generally held within 2 to 5 days-and the formal selection process begins.

The process recognizes that applicants generally want immediate feedback and lets them know right away where they stand. It also emphasizes the fact that expediency in selection is valued.

PHASE 2: A trained and highly skilled background investigator conducts the candidate's background interview. The investigator reviews the questionnaire completed at the orientation session and does a formal interview focused on the following factors:

- Social history;
- Employment;
- Education;

- Finances;
- Criminal history;
- Illegal substance use (within ADA limitations);
- Ability to follow instructions;
- Written and verbal skills; and
- Job fit.

References are checked, and candidates who are within acceptable standards are given a conditional offer of employment.

PHASE 3: Using a computerized Polygraph system, professional Examination polygraphers complete a polygraph examination of each applicant who has been given a conditional offer of employment. The information contained in the background questionnaire and the background interview report are assessed for accuracy. A report is generated, citing any new information obtained and whether the applicant had responses indicative of deception.

PHASE 4: To begin this critical Psychological phase, information Assessment collected thus far on the applicant is forwarded to the staff psychologist and his team for review. Each candidate then undergoes multiple examinations: the written Clinical Assessment Questionnaire (CAQ), assessing emotional stability through 16 personality factors; the Rorschach ink blot test; the B-Pad (Behavioral Personnel Assessment Device); and a clinical interview focused on anger management, chemical usage, psychological history,

problem solving skills, ethical alertness, vocational responsibility, and non-prejudicial thinking.

The results of these tests are scored and rated on a scale of one to five, one being the best. A report is generated to explain the rating and to identify the candidate's strengths and weaknesses.

PHASE 5: Assuming successful completion of each of the prior phases, the candidate is sent for a medical evaluation to

confirm that he/she is able to perform the essential functions of the job with or without reasonable accommodation.

EACH INDIVIDUAL PHASE

of the process is considered to be part of a whole. This ensures that no single factor precludes an individual from employment, unless that factor is essential to meet standards; it ensures an applicant's integrity throughout the process; and it ensures that relevant behavioral factors are not considered in a vacuum.

The phases are not viewed in the context of pass/fail. Instead, they are viewed with an emphasis on integrity, consistency, and anger control, and on ensuring against biases and prejudicial thinking. When a standard is not achieved, the circumstances are evaluated and all other relevant factors are taken into consideration, and a possible override is explored.

Individuals who survive this scrutiny are then hired, oriented, and sent to academy training. Following their successful completion of the academy

program, new officers are assigned a Field Training Officer and continue through the balance of a 12-month probationary period that is designed to ensure they are right for the job.

RESULTS OF THE HIRING

process were analyzed by the Psychological Services Unit and via statistics collected by the Maricopa County Human Resources Department and the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office.

Finding include:

- Among candidates hired, 90 percent successfully completed the 7-week training academy.
- The mean score of academy graduates was 90 percent.
- Of those who completed the academy program, 85 percent completed their initial, 6-month probationary period with satisfactory performance ratings or better.
- The psychological screening process is not biased against applicants based upon age, gender, or race/ethnicity.
- The average time from registration of a candidate's application to his/her start date has dropped from 56.37 days to 31.49 days.
- The attrition rate for the Sheriff's Office as a whole has remained relatively constant.
- The hiring process has done a statistically valid job of selecting the right

candidates for detention officer positions, and in a timely manner.

- More often than not, when the process has failed, a red flag signaling a potential problem was there.

Further analysis is needed on pre-employment testing, physical agility testing, standards validation, and the role of supervision in retention. Ongoing evaluation of the standards, the process, the participants, and the employees is essential.

THE PROCESS WORKS.

Responsible adults are being hired in a responsible way. However, more staff are needed, and much more still needs to be done.

If we intend to hold rigidly to our current standards of quality, we must attract more potential candidates. If we choose to maintain high professional standards, we must break free from traditional 40-hour work weeks, traditional full-time employees, and traditional recruitment schemes. The next step must be toward part-time work, flexible hours, and temporary employees.

We must also develop a marketing strategy that focuses on detention as the quality profession it is and on the exciting career opportunity it can be for responsible, working adults. ■